

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Introduction

The present case study set out to investigate whether the word processor had any discernible influence on the writing behaviour of a lower secondary school ESL student writer. It also investigated the influence of the word processor on the quality of the argumentative essays written by the subject. The study was undertaken because there was a need for teachers to understand the nature of the influence that word processors may have on writing, so that effective teaching strategies can be devised. By looking closely at the relationship between the writing tool, writing behaviour and written products, teachers may gain insights into how the word processor could affect writing and by extension, writing instruction. In this case study involving a single subject, the limitations of the findings are inevitable. Within these limitations, however, the investigations yielded some promising findings.

Summary of Findings

Results of investigations on the writing process and products suggested that the word processor had facilitated the writing of the argumentative essays. The most important finding of this study is that the easy manipulation of texts had greatly enhanced the subject's ability to experiment, explore and to reshape the essays with the word processor. The word processor was found to be very useful, not only in enhancing text quality but also in providing the incentive to do so. The subject was more willing to make changes because of the ease with which this could be done with the word processor. It was her willingness to explore, experiment, revise and make

changes with the word processor that was largely responsible for the holistically better essays.

In contrast to the plan-write-revise approach with the pen-and-paper, the computer writing approach was one, which involved capturing all her thoughts down on screen as they come into her mind, then revise and reorganise. In the absence of an overall plan, the "what next" strategy appeared to have influenced the progress of the writing. The computer writing process was much more recursive than the pen-and-paper writing process because of the ease with which text could be manipulated. With the word processor, the composing style was one that had moved away from an obsession with surface features to one that was focussed on generating and improving the contents of the essay.

The word processing software also appeared to have exerted some influence on the subject's writing style. It freed the subject from mechanical concerns to enable her to focus on improving the contents. The grammar and spelling checker and its error-prompting device have, to a considerable extent, contributed to the fewer errors in essays written with the word processor compared to those written with the pen-and-paper.

Experience with the technology and familiarity with the software was another important factor, which determined the decisions made and problems solved during the writing process. The subject's experience in word processing had influenced her writing approach and strategies.

As far as it is possible to generalize from one particular case, it seems that the novelty of the technology had also played a part in shaping the subject's positive attitudes towards writing with the word processor. To a certain extent, the natural attraction of the computer and its technology, the newness of this writing tool and the

excitement of writing on an electronic keyboard indicated that the Hawthorne effect was present. The computer, in and of itself, was a positive influence on the subject's attitude towards writing. The subject found writing and editing with the word processor to be 'easy', 'enjoyable' and 'less tiring' compared to the pen-and-paper. She also took pride in the printed copy, which she described "like a page from a book".

These promising findings, however, merit additional investigations involving a bigger sample of ESL student writers, more varied genres, and social contexts like small groups or classrooms. Nevertheless, an important insight gained from the observations of her writing behaviours and investigations on text quality is that the use of a word processor could help to make the student writer a better writer.

Finally, as a result of looking closely at one student's approaches to writing with the pen-and-paper and the word processor, one important conclusion can be made: The word processor had influenced the way the subject approached the writing task and facilities unique to the word processor had contributed to the enhancement of text quality. With this, the case study concludes with an important message, contained in the subject's response to a question on her preferred writing tool.

Of course, with the word processor because I find it so very easy to use it... nicer and less tiring! The best thing about writing with the word processor is that, you can make a lot of changes or correct mistakes easily and you don't have to rewrite all over again... Also, you don't have to worry about your spelling because the computer will check and attract your attention to mistakes, if any.

I wish our school could provide us with computers for our writing class.

(Transcript 3, line 90, p. 94)

Pedagogical Implications

As the writing process is instrumental in shaping the written products, the way the student utilise computer technology and its word processing software to produce the essays has important pedagogical implications. The computer is not a magic writing tool that can transform poor writing into good ones. The computer merely supports the cognitive processes involved in planning, writing and revising. As such, it would be unreasonable to expect improved writing just by providing students with computers. The need for teachers to adopt teaching strategies that can take advantage of the computer's capabilities is thus very important. This implies that writing instruction should incorporate writing strategies that are uniquely suited to the use of the word processor.

The findings suggest that if students were to capitalize on the power of the word processor as a writing tool and use it with confidence to enhance their written work, they need to develop an understanding of its application and be skilled in using it. The present study showed that the subject's typing speed of between 15-20 words per minute had helped tremendously in the quick and smooth production of the texts, without much typographical error. Besides basic familiarity with the software, keyboard and typing skills ought to be taught to students before they use the word processor for writing. What good is the word processor if students lack keyboard and typing skills?

If word processors were to be used effectively in the teaching of writing, they must be used in ways that will complement or enhance the range of techniques already in use. On-screen revision preferred by the subject, is a good way to revise as it saves time and mistakes can be corrected immediately. However, due to the limited screen page, revision on hard copies should also be encouraged especially for texts

longer than one page. Teachers might also need to teach students how to use the power of the word processor's block and move commands to try out alternative methods of organising the major points in argumentative writing. To teach revising for unity and coherence, the split screen method can be used. In addition to teaching process strategies related to prewriting, drafting, revising and editing, it is also rewarding, as the present study found out, to instruct students how to exploit the technology of the electronic writing tool to improve their writing. It appears from the present study that text length and text precision or mechanical accuracy are directly affected by the subject's keyboard skills and familiarity with the text editing functions of the word processor. It is possible that with developed keyboard skills and word-processing knowledge, ideas tend to flow more easily and get captured on screen more quickly than when writing with the pen, on paper.

More importantly, observations revealed that the subject had learnt the correct spelling of some words as a result of revising and correcting the mistakes brought to her attention by the error-prompter. It had provided the support and resource that the subject needed to take her essays beyond her level of capability. This could be a positive influence in the long term, especially if students internalize the knowledge gained through responding to the promptings. However, the spelling and grammar checker should be used critically and teachers must monitor its use because the spelling and grammar check programmes found in most word processing software are not foolproof.

The subject also had a positive attitude towards writing with the word processor. Her willingness to try and improve her writing is a result of her positive attitude and perceptions of the writing tool. Hence, teachers should capitalize on students' positive attitudes towards writing with word processors whenever possible and explore ways

in which the natural attraction of the computer and its novelty could be exploited to motivate students to write more and write better.

Limitations of the Study

The design of the study has resulted in serious limitations as to the generalisability of the findings because of the small sample size. A single case study on an individual subject cannot give definitive answers about how word processors can affect writing behaviour, for there are as many versions of writing processes, as there are writers. The writing process is not only complex and recursive, it is also idiosyncratic, that is, determined very much on a personal level. As such, computers, like any other writing tool, may fit differently into the writing processes of different writers in different ways. Furthermore, the study has been limited to an investigation of one individual student taken out of the classroom context. Classrooms are social environments in which students learn to write in collaboration with others. As such, the social element in writing is missing from this study. Taking the subject out of the normal classroom context might have, in some ways, influenced the results of the investigations.

Finally, as a case study is not a sampling research, the findings on this individual subject cannot be used to understand other student writers of the same level. Hence, it would be important to conduct investigations on a bigger sample over a longer period of time.

Suggestions for Future Research

This case study has been limited to an individual ESL student, an experienced computer user who had sole access to a computer and who wrote in an environment,

which was artificially created. Increasing the sample size to include both, experienced and less experienced computer users would better reflect the reality of our classrooms and teaching situations. It would also be useful to take insights gained from this study beyond the artificially created environment to naturally occurring environments like the classrooms, so that the writing context and classroom dynamics, a dimension that was missing from the present case study, could be investigated. The impact of the word processor on peer collaboration or collaborative writing should also be studied. This is because the public nature of the computer screen display may promote peer review and editing. Another rich area worth investigating would be the effect of writing with the pen-and-paper in combination with the word processor on writing.

Viewed positively, the error-prompter had freed the subject from mechanical concerns to concentrate on generating ideas to improve the essay. To what extent are the spelling and grammar checking programmes reliable, since it is common knowledge that they are not foolproof? What effects do they have on student writing in the long term? Future research should thus focus on the positive and negative effects of the grammar and spelling checker on students' writing in the long term.

The findings of the present study have also caused many more questions to be asked: Would the word processor affect the quality of essays other than the argumentative essays investigated in the study? The findings indicated that the word processor had augmented the subject's revising activities but discounted prewriting or planning before writing, traditionally thought of as critical to the writing process. Would writing on computers affect planning and revising strategies? Finally, for the teacher, it would also be important to find out how word processors could affect teaching writing as a process.